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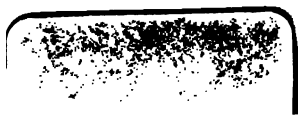
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HINTS FOR THE TIMES.

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REV. GEORGE SMITH M.A.

48.1633.







# HINTS FOR THE TIMES,

OR

THE RELIGIONS OF SENTIMENT, OF FORM,  
AND OF FEELING,

CONTRASTED WITH

VITAL GODLINESS



BY THE

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Oh, how unlike the complex works of man,  
Heaven's easy, artless, unencumber'd plan !  
No meretricious graces to beguile,  
No clustering ornaments to clog the pile ;  
From ostentation, as from weakness, free,  
It stands like the cerulean arch we see,  
Majestic in its own simplicity.  
Inscribed above the portal, from afar  
Conspicuous as the brightness of a star,  
Legible only by the light they give,  
Stand the soul-quickenings words—BELIEVE AND LIVE.  
COWPER.





## HINTS FOR THE TIMES.

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THE general features of true religion are in all ages substantially the same, although its complexion may be influenced by surrounding institutions and the character of the times. The spiritual dangers of individual believers, and the tendency to corruption in Christian communities, are generally the same in every period of the history of the church of Christ. The beacons of warning reared by the hand of Inspiration in the scripture record of the early Christian churches, are doubly important when regarded under this aspect.

These remarks apply with peculiar force to the circumstances attending the spread of Christianity among the people of Galatia, as their history may be gleaned from a comparison of the Acts of the Apostles with the writings of St. Paul.

The Epistle to the Galatians is generally supposed to have been one of the earliest epistles written by the Apostle Paul to any Christian church. The gospel had originally been preached in Galatia by Paul, accompanied by Silas and Timothy. Two distinct visits are related in the Acts of the Apostles, as having been made by him to the infant churches in that district. At first the gospel produced a remarkable effect on the Galatians; and the ardour of their affectionate gratitude to Paul, and the fervour of their Christian joy on their first introduction to the privileges of Christianity, are made a subject of subsequent allusion in this epistle: "Where is then the bless-

edness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me."

The result proved that this effect was only transient and superficial. The efforts of false teachers—their own imperfect insight into the fundamental doctrines of free grace, and the natural tendency of the human heart to wander from the simplicity of the truth of the gospel—had combined in changing the aspect of their religious state; and in the view of their sad spiritual declension and defection from the pure doctrine of Christ, the apostle is led to exclaim; "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into another gospel, which is not another."

And again the same earnest anxiety and disappointment of Paul is expressed in the language of surprise and remonstrance: "Ye did run well; who did hinder you, that ye should not obey the truth?"

The decay of vital godliness, and the entrance of error, among the churches of Galatia, afford us a painful lesson, that the greatest amount of religious privileges, and the highest degree of faithfulness on the part of spiritual instructors, afford no certain security against the existence of very defective views of religion among a community of professing Christians. Even the instructions of an apostle were insufficient to restrain and check the natural bias of the human heart towards error. And although a manifest absence of the fruits of conversion and growth in grace from the scene of a pastor's ministerial labours should justly be made an occasion of serious self-examination and deep humiliation before God in prayer by himself individually; and although it is a fact confirmed by very extensive observation, that the spiritual state of a pastor reacts powerfully on the spiritual condition of his peo-

ple;—yet, on the other hand we have, in the case of St. Paul and the Galatian Christians, a melancholy instance in proof that not even the greatest amount of pastoral anxiety and faithfulness, of intensity of earnest exhortation and remonstrance,—not even the highest degree of devotedness to the work of bringing souls to Christ, can insure, in the mysterious wisdom of God, an extensive harvest of conversion of sinners to God, or of real depth of spiritual prosperity and Christian grace in the people.

It is the writer's object, in this essay, to examine in detail the three different kinds of defective religion which, alas ! extensively prevail in what is commonly deemed a Christian state of society ; and into which, after a temporary and partial anxiety about their souls, men are frequently found to relapse and settle down. There are few persons blessed with the privilege of a faithful

ministry, of godly parents, or of pious friends, who do not, at some period of their lives, ponder on the things of eternity, and for a time at least set out on a course of religious profession.

The allurements of an evil world—the absorbing interest of pursuits unlawful only in the excess to which they are followed—the consequent increasing languor, torpor, and deadness of spiritual desires—the deceitfulness of the human heart, and the ever-watchful malignity of Satan,—combine to hinder, thwart, and subvert the unstable soul; and, alas! disappointed hope and affectionate anxiety alike prompt the inquiry, “Ye did run well; who did hinder you, that ye should not obey the truth?”

I. One of the most prevalent forms of this defective Christianity, into which men are found to turn aside as into so many

bye-paths from the narrow way of evangelical holiness ; and on which they are content to travel over many a weary mile through this vale of tears, may be denominated the *religion of* SENTIMENT.

This *sentimental* kind of Christianity is often the form of defective religion, into which a person of natural amiability, of refined sensibilities, and of educated mind, is observed to settle down. Such a character is filled with raptures of delighted taste, when he views the glories of the material world, when he soars on the wings of imagination into the starry heights of heaven, and contemplates, in the ardour of intellectual enthusiasm, the myriads of sidereal orbs, and the unknown inhabitants which probably occupy their surface. He dives with intellectual delight into the depths of the earth, and pores over the geological phenomena which mark the changes on its bosom.



He explores the various tribes of animal and vegetable life, and culls from the field of natural history many a sublime sentiment and many an elevating reflection on the glorious attributes of the Creator. And with such a feeling he approaches the deep mystery of "God manifest in the flesh," and admires the general marks of benevolence which shine forth from the glorious narrative of gospel history. He can admire many of the sublime sentiments of scripture, and the moral precepts which flowed from the lips of Him who "spake as never man spake." Nay, more than this ; he can admire the glorious structure of redemption, and can adjust into the most harmonious proportions of truth the more prominent doctrines of Christian theology. He catches, too, a portion of its softening spirit and indirect influence on society around him. He can glean from the inspired records of Holy

Writ many a poetic charm, and borrow many an ideal conception of the morally sublime and beautiful. He can admire the beauties of architecture—the imitative triumphs of sculpture—and the bold achievements of painting, which emblazon the incidents of scripture, and adorn the temples of God's house. He, who never yet was truly humbled for sin, can silently weep over the efforts of art to represent the Saviour's cross, or the agony in the garden of Gethsemane. He can walk on the hill of Calvary, or climb up the Mount of Olives, or loiter by the sea of Galilee; and while pourtraying with the liveliest images of fancy the events of the Redeemer's life, his soul imbibes the full draught of poetic rapture, and rises on the full tide of poetic inspiration. With him the religion of the gospel consists of the romance of poetry. The airy dreams of speculation tinge all his views of Christ,

and impart a colour to all his conceptions of the Deity. With him heaven is made to consist of crystal fountains—of beautiful landscapes—of lovely flowers—of enchanting music—of poetic figures, and of an eternal spring. But, alas ! with all this sentimental admiration of the Bible and speculative knowledge of the truths of revelation,—with all this poetic glow of ardour and delicate sensibility of mind,—the deep dark clouds of spiritual ignorance and of spiritual death may still brood over that soul. He whose natural feelings have been touched, and moved, and refined, may remain yet an utter stranger to self, to God, and to Christ. He may not yet have experienced true contrition of soul for sin; he may never yet have wept over the hardness of his depraved heart ; he may never yet have realized that misery of spiritual bondage, and those depths of eternal destruction, from which the Saviour came to

set the sinner free; he may never have been led, in the agony of conscious self-abasement and guilt, to exclaim, "What must I do to be saved?"

This kind of false Christianity is the form of religious profession, with which the man of taste, the man of science, and the votary of human philosophy is often satisfied. This was the rock of spiritual danger, on which many a soul among the early hearers of the gospel at Athens and at Corinth fatally struck to its ruin, and which rendered "the preaching of the cross to them that perish foolishness." This is also the speculative, philosophical, theoretical religion, with which the man of the world is so often contented. But this sentimental Christianity has no real hold on the affections; exercises no powerful influence of salutary control over the conscience; and, alas! too frequently dwindles away altogether, and at last de-

generates into scepticism and secret unbelief.

II. A second kind of defective Christianity, which is prevalent in our land, may be termed *the religion of FORM*.

This *formal* profession of Christianity conducts the soul by a cold and dreary path, without a sunbeam to cheer, or a ray to gladden the sinner in the display of the love of God. Religion is viewed by such a character under a clouded and cheerless aspect. It is a system of chilling restraints, casting a damp on the hopes, infusing doubt into the soul, binding a heavy burden on the conscience, shedding an air of uncertainty over the future, and investing the character and dealings of God with unmingled sternness and severity. In such a state of mind, fear rather than love, is the grand influential motive to exertion. Persons of this description

have learnt the necessity of adopting at least the semblance of godliness. By this they hope to assuage the rising terrors of conscience, and the stern realities of coming judgment. And if conscience sometimes suggests the suspicion that all is not right with God, and that the most laborious efforts of self-justifying formalism fall infinitely short of the strict requirements of God's law; then they catch a mere glimpse of the atonement of Christ as little, if anything, more than a supplementary addition to the meritorious acts of self-righteous well-doing, and proceed onward with the dark shadows of spiritual ignorance thickening around them. Such a class of hearers are generally the most difficult to be awakened by the appeals of the Christian ministry. They have adopted enough of the forms of religion to satisfy conscience and disarm the threatenings of God's word of their power to arouse. They

number themselves among God's people, and adopt the garb and speak the language of Israel. But their religion consists more in the proprieties of outward formalism, than in the internal warfare against sinful desires. Their efforts and aims refer more to the times and the seasons,—the ceremonies and the decencies of divine worship, than to the victory over sin and the consolations of the gospel of peace. Their religious comforts, if ever such feelings are realized, are of a negative and passive order, rather than the positive joy and the active self-devotion of a soul conscious of being “delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son.”

And here we cannot help noticing how much the natural man in all ages, and under every dispensation of error, is willing to undertake, to perform, and even to suffer, in preference to accepting the salva-

tion of his soul as the free gift of God through the grace of the Gospel. The poor deluded heathen with the car of Juggernaut, or the fires of the Suttee, or the tedious pilgrimage, or the excruciating nails and spikes, vainly hopes to obtain holiness, and to merit the bliss of heaven. The Roman Catholic, by self-inflicted sufferings, by self-imposed punishments, by penances, by indulgences, by prayers to the Virgin, by the invocations of saints, by abstinence from food, by seclusion from the ordinary joys and employments of social life, by the dark solitude of the cloister, by the imprisonment of the hermit's cell, by the terrors of an imaginary purgatory, and by subjection to the frauds and severities of priestcraft,—hopes to secure a stock of inherent righteousness, and thus to build a foundation of confidence against the day of judgment. And so in a modified form and degree amongst



ourselves, we behold the essence of self-righteousness in that excessive attention to form, and that undue dependence on the externals of religion, by which many persons hope to gain the favour of God, and to dissipate the fear of death.

Under the enlightened spirit of a Protestant state of society, they are ordinarily too well instructed in the general truths of Christianity, to believe in the puerile superstitions, or to submit to the arduous penances of Popery. But they substitute the visible church for the invisible Redeemer, — the sacraments for faith, — a mere external compliance with the forms of religion, for true conversion of soul to God, — a pertinacious zeal about the particularities and details of will-worship and voluntary humility, for evangelical repentance and self-loathing abasement before the cross of Christ.

This is the defective form of religious

profession into which persons are frequently found to relapse, who have been partially convinced of their guilt as sinners, and who are imperfectly enlightened on the doctrinal truths of Christianity. They shroud themselves, as in a mantle of death, in the professed sincerity of their desire to do what is right, and in their correct discharge of moral obligations and social duties. In such cases, the evil of sin has been but inadequately realized; or else they could not be satisfied with so poor a counterfeit of the Gospel of peace. Their fears have been aroused, and their conscience has been awakened; but they have failed to penetrate to the heart's lowest depths, and to probe to the bottom of the wound. They are satisfied with a false healing and a superficial cure; and are contented with such a remedy as the religion of form supplies. They go onward self-satisfied and self-secure, shutting up

every avenue to the approach of spiritual light, and fortifying themselves against every arrow of conviction. They ground their hope of acceptance with God and the salvation of their immortal souls (oh ! infinitely stupendous weight of superstructure to rest on so frail a foundation,) on their conscious integrity of intention, and on their professed desire of meaning well and of acting right. All sense of their spiritual necessities is gradually effaced ; and at length they settle down into a cold system of moral obedience to some general views of rectitude, destitute alike of the constraining motive of love to Christ, and of the distinctive peculiarity of the gospel of grace. Sentiments similar in kind, and differing only in degree from the ethics of an Aristotle, the lessons of an Epictetus, the teaching of a Seneca, the philosophy of a Socrates, or the code of a Confucius, form a rule of daily life to

the professed believers in the atonement of the Son of God.

This is often the religion of the mere moral philosopher, of the votary of fashion, or of the mere religious partisan. He sees in this defective state of religious profession that which will relieve and console his mind for the conscious absence of spirituality and entire devotedness of heart. In such a man there is no spiritual view of the glory of the cross; no spiritual realizing of the tender love of God; no insight into the depravity of the unregenerate heart; no sense of condemnation under the terrors of a spiritual law; no soaring of the spirit in the solitude of the closet on the wings of devotion to a risen and glorified Redeemer; no unity of spirit or fellowship of feeling with the saints in Christ and the spiritual Israel of God; no foretaste of heaven, no sense of adoption into the family of God.

This admixture of the law with the Gospel was the sad state of religion, into which a large portion of the Galatian church relapsed. In its modified symptoms and softened features, the more prominent characteristics of this state of soul are awfully prevalent amongst ourselves.

This danger is, of all others, the most insidious, and the most destructive in these days of unsettledness and change. Nearly every Christian household in the middle and upper ranks of life could unfold its tale of sorrow, and reveal the fearful inroads of formalism on the once happily united family. Behold the promising youth, the fondly cherished object of many prayers, trained in the way of early piety, encouraged by parental example, fostered with more than ordinary tenderness and care, instructed from a child in the Scriptures, and gladdening the heart of his parents by his amiability of natural disposition.

Behold him first leaving his father's home for school, and followed by the anxious prayers and yearning affection of parental solicitude. See him happily preserved from moral contamination, and restored again after a while to shed an additional ray of joy on the happy family meeting.

We contemplate him thus far as a hopeful inquirer after truth. But, alas ! in his promising career of amiability he stops short of Christ, and has not yet experienced that "good hope through grace" which, "as an anchor of the soul sure and stedfast," would have rendered him secure from the coming storms of religious error.

Hopeful and full of promise, he goes forth at length to encounter the cares of life, and to prepare for the pursuits of approaching manhood. Follow him (it may be) to the seats of academic learning,

and behold him engaged in the honourable competition of literary emulation. But soon the absorbing engagements of human science, and the increasing thirst of literary distinction, rob the word of God of its apportioned hour of study and leave the Bible undisturbed on the shelf. The emissaries of error are at hand to intercept their victim. Subtle disputations are held, and fatal doubts are infused, concerning the supreme and exclusive authority of that blessed volume, which early training had taught him to love and value. He is told of a joint rule of faith vested in certain ancient writings, which his intellectual pride leads him to study, and of which his intimate knowledge subsequently makes him vain. Behold him the slave of patristic erudition, forsaking the living waters of inspired truth for the turbid channel of human fallibility. But his godly and aged father ! his pious and ten-

der mother ! his earnest and affectionate sisters ! start before him in visionary presence, and check the hallucinations of religious error.

But again, he is taught by the seducers of his soul to regard the warm effusions of piety and the lively instructions of home, which are embalmed in the sweet recollections of childhood, as the fruits of puritanic strictness and the effects of fanatic zeal. Deadly notions of sacramental justification instil their poison, and expel the faint remnants of truth. Deadness of soul towards God is followed by coldness of heart towards the parents, who once watched the bud of early promise. He soon learns to despise their anxious warnings as weakness, and to count their wisdom folly. And thus he returns after a season to the endearments of home, no longer to gladden with the smile of harmony, but to sow the seed of disagree-



ment, and to infuse the topics of dissension among that united band. Remonstrances are raised in vain ; reproofs are unheeded ; family endearments lose their influence ; and parental authority retains no longer its sway. His mind is cankered by prejudice ; religious eccentricities are watched and remembered. A dislike of supposed peculiarities grows at last into a hatred of the truth itself. He embarks on the voyage of life, the zealous bigot of forms and the bitter opponent of evangelical truth.

We leave him awhile, till we behold him again in middle life, the centre of new associations, and wielding an acquired influence. Behold him the victim of a confirmed delusion, absorbed in the engagements of professional life or in the busy gains of commerce. The dawn of early light and the impressions of youth have not yet quite disappeared. Some-

times the remembrance of parental piety softens him in his career of prejudice, and melts his soul by the power of filial love. The world is now more firmly enthroned in his heart ; its anxieties press on his soul with increasing weight ; its cares corrode his mind with growing power. He has wounds which the Gospel might relieve ; he has sorrows which the word of God might remove. But here again prejudice crosses his path, and intercepts his way. Formalism tries too successfully to retain its hold. Isolated from Christian intercourse, he voluntarily banishes himself from the sympathies and counsel of godly associates. His pride of soul condemns the expostulations of pious affection, or the warnings of ministerial faithfulness, as drawn from the vocabulary of fanaticism, or the ravings of hypocrisy.

But see him once more as he approaches the termination of life, still keeping aloof

from those who might prove his counselors and promote his happiness; still madly dashing from his lip the sweet cup of evangelical peace; the wreck of former hopes, the withered blight of early promise; settled down into a confirmed contempt of godliness and hostility to spiritual views of divine truth.

And here we leave his melancholy history, as he mingles in the crowd of aged formalists, who throng the last stages of the broad road of destruction. Old age is generally a barren period of life, and seldom revives the warmth of buoyant, youthful earnestness.

It is one of the most common, as well as one of the most heart-rending spectacles, which a Christian minister is called to contemplate in his labours;—that of an aged man, who has grown old in the formal profession of religion, who has for many years frequented the house of God,

and has made stated approaches to the table of the Lord ; but who nevertheless continues dark in mind, seared in heart, benumbed in conscience, dead in feeling, hardened in prejudice, destitute of sympathy towards all spiritual religion, and descending full of gray hairs to the grave in dull formalism and lifeless ignorance of Christ.

It is a melancholy spectacle to behold, even among the assemblies of those who at the Lord's Supper commemorate the love of their dying Redeemer, many a guest clothed in this garb of self-righteousness, and not in the wedding-garment of Christ ; seeking to efface, as by an act of oblivion, an outstanding debt of deficiency by a formal attendance on the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. It is one of the predicted characteristics of the perilous times in the last days, that there should be many such nominal Christians " having

a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.”

III. The third form of defective Christianity, into which many a religious professor settles down after a season of promise and hope, is what may be styled *the religion of mere FEELING*.

This is frequently the state of the young and inexperienced—of the illiterate and ignorant, and of the religious enthusiast. The religion of such persons springs from animal excitement, and is the effect of a temporary impulse. A startling event of Providence—an awakening appeal from the ministry of God’s sanctuary—a striking passage of Holy Scripture—the sudden death of some dear friend—the silent voice of affliction—the spectacle of a death-bed scene—or the melancholy solemnities of the grave-yard, may arrest the careless soul in its career of irreligion, and cause it to pause over the prospect of eternal ruin.

I need not state that there is in such a condition of the soul, thus far, an approximation to the course of every true convert to the Gospel. Nay, I may add more than this, and assert the unspeakable value of such impressions as those which have been described. Such events are a direct message from God to the careless soul, and are, almost invariably, the first means of awakening sinners to repentance. The impressions themselves are good and wholesome: the evil has been that, like the "morning cloud or early dew," they have so generally evaporated beneath the burning heat of worldly temptation.

But in the case under consideration there is no permanency—no depth—no real insight into the evil of sin, into the deceitfulness of the human heart, or into the mercy of God in the divine scheme of gospel reconciliation. Religion is with such persons a mere transient impulse,

arising in feeling, living in excitement, and dying away with the increasing weakness of passive impressions. There is much that is good, and much also that is sincere, in persons of this kind; but there is no experimental acquaintance with the truth—no scriptural views of the sacrifice of the Son of God—no resting on the promises of God for the strength of his grace—no well-grounded, lasting hope of acceptance. The Saviour is dethroned from the cross, and their own animal feelings dictate the measure and form the ground of their transient and temporary peace. But there is no love of holiness for its own sake—no permanency of self-dedication to God—no crucifixion of the flesh, with the affections and lusts thereof.

We may sometimes behold the advancing tide as it gains on the sea-shore, borne onward in the might, and majesty, and beauty of the ocean, till it covers every

hollow spot, and forms one fair expanse of watery surface. But soon the waves retire, and where a little time before all was beautiful and refreshing to the eye, the receding tide leaves one vast expanse of barren, sandy shore or rugged rock. Soon, again, the naked, sterile surface is overspread by the rising element, which after a short pause recedes again and leaves a scene of sandy waste. Such is the character of that religion which changes with the ever-varying ebb and flow of feeling. Such is the fleeting nature of that religious principle, which penetrates no deeper than to the exterior surface of the heart. It resembles the class of hearers mentioned by our Lord in the parable of the sower : “ He that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it : yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while : for when tribulation or persecu-



tion ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended."

Such is the description of a large class of hearers of the word, who resemble the character of those unstable souls of whom it was said, that they were "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."

This is the state of many a young female who, in the rite of confirmation, or in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or under the chastening hand of God, or in the solemn hours of severe and dangerous sickness, or amid the awakening appeals of a faithful ministry, "has tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come;" but who, in opposition to the dictates of a partially-enlightened conscience, is led by the solicitation of friends, or by an innate love of vanity and admiration, into the circles of fashionable gaiety, where religion is unknown,

and the Saviour's name is dishonoured. Dissatisfaction ensues—conscience lifts up its voice within—religion enters its protest—spiritual consolations depart—she withdraws from worldly scenes for a season—she returns humbled, sorrowful, heart-stricken, and unhappy, to the solitude of her chamber. Resolutions of amendment are formed—plans of decided abandonment of the world are entertained.

But the snare is again laid by the great adversary of souls. She again rushes into the forbidden scenes of temptation, and loses, in a continuous round of gaiety and amusement and flattery, the vividness of former impressions, and the tenderness of her first love. Ever and anon the word of God finds access to her conscience, and pleads on behalf of a slighted Saviour. But the relapse is fatal; the return to a right mind is periodical and uncertain. She sometimes is found in the attitude of



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a drooping penitent. A few hasty prayers are offered — conscience is oppressed — there is an explosion of feeling — a transient peace is obtained : but soon again she rushes into the world, drowns conscience, grieves the Spirit of God, and yields herself anew to the service of that world which she still loves, and which she is unprepared to relinquish. A few crude notions and vague ideas of Christian truth are retained. Anxiety partially returns, and early impressions are reproduced ; but all is doubt and painful uncertainty. She has not yet abandoned prayer ; and sometimes, in the secret feelings of her heart, she cherishes a peace, built on the frail foundation of natural excitement. And thus she goes onward through life ; and at length, after a day of alternate sunshine and clouds — of alternate hopes and fears — of alternate contrition and worldliness — that soul sinks into eternity, and sets



for ever beneath the horizon of the tomb ; but leaving it a matter of painful uncertainty whether again to rise in the blessed regions of immortal glory, or whether to remain for ever in the ocean-depths of endless despair !

This defective form of religious profession is also very prevalent in most congregations. It is a state of mind which, by tender treatment and judicious counsel, may, by the blessing of God, become the precursor of a matured insight into the truth and a confirmed decision in holy things. But those words of Scripture form a sad illustration of the case in point —“A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.”

Having endeavoured to discriminate and distinguish the various forms of spiritual declension and defective religion prevalent amongst us, I shall endeavour, in conclu-

sion, to bring before the mind of the reader a few features of true, vital godliness, as they are depicted to our view in God's word. And what shall we term the religion of the new-born soul, living on Christ by faith, and rejoicing in a sense of its filial relation to God? As distinguished from the religion of mere *sentiment*, it may be denominated the religion of the *heart*. As compared with the religion of mere *form*, it may be termed the religion of *privilege*. As contrasted with the religion of mere *feeling*, it may be styled the religion of *principle*. Not that true religion excludes sentiment and refinement from the understanding—not that it underrates the value of a decorous attention to forms—not that it would expel the feelings from the matter of religion. Who can better enter into the elevating conceptions of the glory of the Creator?—who can more fully realize the spiritual value of the

sacraments of Christ?—who should enter with deeper feeling into the absorbing glories and joys of the Gospel, than he who is partaker of “a good hope through grace,” and rejoices in the prospect of eternal glory?

This religion of the heart, of privilege, of principle, is alone the true Gospel of Jesus Christ; and I would earnestly exhort each of my readers to bring their several states and conditions to the touchstone of God's word, that by the help of the Holy Spirit they may “try the things that differ,” and ascertain their real character in the sight of God.

For this purpose it is necessary to remember,

*First*, that true religion, as far as it is really operative in the soul, is ever accompanied by a spirit of *deep humiliation before God for sin*. The more vividly we realize the awful fact, that sin is the



deadly thing which has alienated the soul from God, and through which "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now," converting the original blessing pronounced on the earth into a curse, and the fruitful source of all the misery and death which desolate and destroy mankind,—the more fully shall we value the blessed and efficacious remedy provided in the cross of Christ, and the more deeply shall we abase ourselves at the footstool of divine mercy. This humiliation for sin is the essence of a Christian spirit, and is a necessary ingredient in true repentance.

It was to such a contrite and humble spirit that our Lord made the promise of the spiritual comforts of the gospel in this life, and a participation in the glories of his kingdom. "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for their's is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted."

Every revelation of God to man recorded in Scripture was productive of deep self-abhorrence, and self-abasement.\* The nearer the access which the soul attains unto God, the more marked will be the absence of familiarity of spirit or of phraseology in the effusions of the heart. The seraphim about the throne veil their faces and cover their feet, as unworthy to behold and unworthy to stand in the presence of God. The angelic hosts, who cause the courts of heaven to resound with the anthems of eternal praise, pursue that glorious theme prostrate on their faces before the throne.

Let it also be borne in mind,

*Secondly*, that the religion of the Gospel breathes the spirit of *simple faith and affiance in Christ*, apart from all mingling notions of self-righteousness, self-sufficiency,

\* See Job xlii. 5 and 6 ; Isaiah vi. 5 ; Rev. i. 17.

and self-dependence. To the soul of the believer Christ will be "all in all;" the sole foundation of hope, the only ground of confidence, the only plea of mercy, the only source of strength, and the only title to salvation. To him the cross of Christ is no barren sentiment or lifeless notion, but a living reality. It enters into the soul of his religion, and forms the life-blood of his spiritual activity. To the fountain of Christ's atoning blood he will continually repair to wash away his daily sins, and to blot out the guilt of his best services. To the eye of his soul Christ will be continually present as the "new and living way" of access into the presence of a reconciled Father.

Though he is sometimes "for a season in heaviness through manifold temptation"—though, in his voyage through the troublous sea of life, he has to buffet with its billows—though the waves run high, the

tempest resounds fiercely, the sky is obscured by dark and lowering clouds, and the frail bark of the soul is sometimes carried in an uncertain course ; yet he has Christ as the polar star by which to guide his course ; there is hope presiding at the helm, to guide his soul into the fair haven of spiritual rest. It is because he knows that " Christ has died and is risen again," that he sinks not beneath the floods of despondency and fear. He hears that encouraging voice calling to him on the deep, " It is I, be not afraid." Therefore he draws his confidence from enlarged views of Christ, and not from defective views of sin. It is the bright rays of divine mercy shining from the golden sun of a Saviour's love, and reflected from the falling tears of the penitent's cloud of sorrow, which form the beautiful rainbow of hope in the spiritual heavens.

It may also be stated,

*Thirdly*, that the true child of God bears a testimony to the truth by the holiness of his life, and makes *a consistent confession of Christ before an evil world.*

Charity checks in his heart all censorious harshness and needless severity of speech towards those with whom he himself once travelled on the broad road to ruin. He can view with leniency, and cherish with affectionate sympathy—he can encourage by example, and nurse by the intercessions of prayer, the weakest attainments of the feeblest babe in Christ. He who has wept much for his own sin will be tender and considerate to the temptations and infirmities of others, and will cherish a feeling of compassionate sympathy towards the least followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.\*

\* “Some observe, from the equal number of the wise and foolish virgins, what a charitable decorum (it is

But with the vanities, the gaieties, the follies, the fashionable dissipations of a sinful world, he feels that he has nothing to do. With the snares and temptations of this life he feels that he can make no compromise. His "affections are set on things above:" his heart's treasure is in heaven, whither he would also point the desires of his fellow-sinners in a careless and unbelieving world.

But it may be observed, .

*Fourthly*, that, if vital godliness be truly influential in the soul, the Christian

Archbishop Tillotson's expression) Christ observes, as if he would hope that the number of true believers were near equal to that of hypocrites, or, at least, would teach us to hope the best concerning those that profess religion, and to think of them with a bias to the charitable side. Though in judging of ourselves, we ought to remember that the gate is strait, and few find it; yet, in judging of others, we ought to remember that the Captain of our Salvation brings many sons to glory."—*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Parable of the ten Virgins.*

will not be satisfied with a mere negative testimony to Christ, by the silent consistency of his outward profession among the unbelieving portion of mankind : *his efforts to glorify the Saviour will be of a more positive and active kind.* He will not be content to bury his talent in a napkin, and to live in useless and unprofitable indolence. The language of his heart towards God will continually be, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" He remembers the many thousands in his native land who are suffering the anguish of unsanctified affliction, and are living in rebellion against their Maker. There will be moments when tenderness of spirit towards God, in the view of the greatness of his own pardon and salvation, will react in the strongest emotions of sympathy for his fellow-men ; and he will experience those tender sensibilities of compassion for his fellow-sinners, and of holy jealousy for

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the honour of God, which led the inspired psalmist to exclaim, "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law." He will desire to bear his part, as far as ability and opportunities permit, in the various existing schemes of philanthropy for ameliorating the temporal condition of mankind, and for the diffusion of Christian truth. He will feel that he is no longer his own, nor at liberty to consume those talents of time or of education, of wealth or of influence, in consulting his own ease or administering to his own carnal pleasure. He remembers that he is "bought with a price," and is constrained by the most powerful of motives to "glorify God in his body and in his spirit, which are God's." He gazes, with weeping eye and sorrowful heart, on the masses of ignorance and crime, of infidelity and atheism, which are stalking through the land. He will endeavour to speak a word



of seasonable reproof, or of affectionate warning, to the careless and impenitent about his own home and encompassing his own dwelling. He will seek to reclaim others from the miserable bondage of sin, whose "wages is death," and to enlist them into that service which, in his own experience, he has found to be perfect freedom and perfect peace. He will also remember the wide expanse of unreclaimed paganism in foreign lands, where God is unknown, and where Satan reigns undisturbed in his kingdom of darkness. While the thoughtless multitude are ready to deride and censure the work of Christian missions to the heathen; as the hope of the visionary and the dream of the enthusiast, his conscience will approve, his words will recommend, and his actions will assist in the blessed endeavour to plant the banner of the cross on every sin-polluted shore. He knows the unspeakable value of one soul

plucked by human instrumentality from destruction, and converted from sin to God. He realizes the happy privilege of contributing his mite of effort and of self-denial, and mingling his offering of prayer with the intercessions of God's people, that the Saviour may be more widely glorified, and that the glorious predictions of divine truth may be fulfilled in the universal triumphs of the Gospel, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ."

It may also be stated,

*Fifthly*, that wherever true religion is really prospering in the heart, there will exist *a growing conformity of spirit to Christ, and an increasing likeness to his image in the soul.* Wherever the pure Gospel has been received into the heart, and is exercising its daily influence on the life, there will be evidenced a progressive renewal of the soul by the sanctifying in-

fluence of the Holy Spirit. There will be an earnest endeavour to "grow in grace," to "press forward" in the Christian course, to rise into spiritual manhood, and to attain "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

The absence of these marks of progress will ever indicate an unhealthy state of the soul, the secret encouragement of unchristian dispositions, or the existence of unwatchfulness and indolence.

The religion of the Gospel is emphatically the religion of the closet. The temptations and difficulties of the soul are manifold and various, and need continual watchfulness unto prayer. The favour of the world, no less than the opposition of mankind, may be in turn the weapon forged in the laboratory of Satan for the perversion of the Christian from the simplicity of the Gospel. Many a soul which, like the oak in the hardihood of its native

mountains, stood unmoved by the storms and frosts of persecution, has dwindled away into a tender exotic in the mild soil of popular favour.

In the strength of constant communion with God, it is the believer's safety and happiness to prepare for the unalloyed pleasures of heaven, and to ripen in growing meetness of disposition for the holy employments of God's kingdom. And, with such a glorious prospect in view, his state will be one not only of conflict, but also of enjoyment. In such a state, however, there are seldom witnessed any outbursts of ecstatic joy; any enthusiastic anticipations of the glory of paradise. There is no desire to depict and anticipate its details, or to administer to the cravings of a morbid fancy; but a sobriety of feeling, a moderation of spirit; a willingness to abide God's time in the tabernacle of the body, without impatient desires of

release from the warfare ; a patient waiting for the Lord's summons ;—meanwhile working for God, living the hidden life of faith in a risen and interceding Saviour, having the “loins girded and the lights burning,” in humble and watchful expectancy of the bridegroom's coming.

If, in tracing these outlines of vital religion in the soul, the reader is distressed by the fear that he has been hitherto satisfied with a few religious ideas floating in mere sentiment, or has been resting on a system of empty forms, or has been the subject of a fleeting impulse of natural feeling,—let him follow out in honest candour those convictions to their inmost depths, and sound the lowest bottom of his heart with the plummet of God's word.

But let him also be reminded, for his encouragement, that no extent of religious

declension, no state of spiritual relapse, can possibly shut out any individual penitent from a Saviour's love, or from at once retracing his steps to the cross of Christ, and "obtaining mercy and finding grace to help in time of need." Let the word of God be more and more his study by day, and his meditation by night. Let the throne of grace attest the increased earnestness of his prayers, and the fervour of his devotions. Let him learn to cast himself more fully on the all-sufficiency of divine grace for wisdom to direct and strength to sustain his tottering steps; that whereas it might be said of him as of the Galatians of old, "Ye *did* run well;" so in his quickened pace heavenward he may henceforth experience the truth of the promise, "They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah xl. 31.)

And before the subject which has been under discussion is finally dismissed from our consideration, let it leave on the mind two wholesome practical truths for our instruction.

I. The popular errors in religion which have been described, suggest the duty and necessity of an *humble, teachable spirit* in our inquiries after truth. Pride, whether intellectual or spiritual, is the very opposite to the spirit of the gospel, and the most frequent source of religious error. God will have the Christian thoroughly simple-minded and dependent. Just views of religion can only be received by the humble mind. For what purpose was it that our Lord took a little child and set him in the midst of his disciples, but that he might by a significant act present to their minds an emblem of that humility, teachableness, and simplicity, which are

essential to the Christian character, and to the right understanding of the sublime truths of the Gospel? "Ye see your calling, brethren," (said the apostle Paul to the Christian church gathered out from the refined and luxurious city of Corinth,) "how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise." A neglect of the Bible and an unwillingness to bow before the supreme and exclusive authority of God's word, is one of the most common, as well as the most substantial, barriers to the free ingress of spiritual light and divine comfort into the soul.

Christianity, indeed, is no rival or opponent of human science, when rightly pursued, and wisely directed to the advancement of human happiness and the glory of God. It denounces not the culti-



vation of literature, nor despises the learning of this world, when employed as subsidiary to the gospel and the handmaid of truth. Christianity, however, gives the death-blow to human conceit and to intellectual pride. The wisest philosophers that ever lived, have found it to be their wisdom to approach as little children the inspired sources of knowledge in the word of God. They have soared, with the immortal Newton, amid the sublime regions of astronomy; they have explored the wide and diversified paths of physical science; they have, as the instruments of infinite benevolence, abundantly enriched the stores of human enjoyment by those experimental arts, which serve to extend the empire of mind over matter.

And yet they returned from their successful investigations in the material world, and found *one* subject in which those intellectual powers failed, and they willingly

prostrated themselves in the humility of conscious weakness. They drank the refreshing streams of happiness and knowledge from the fountain of inspiration, and slaked that thirst which human science could not satisfy, in the full enjoyment of God and the consolations of His word.

Christian humility, attired in the robe of simplicity, softly approaches the vestibule of heaven, where God's attendant angels, ministering to the heirs of salvation, are waiting to snatch a coal from the altar of truth, and to touch the lips of the penitent and devout applicant. "If any man do God's will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God."

II. Let the consideration of this subject leave also on the mind a second practical lesson: that *a mere lifeless belief in Christian orthodoxy, a mere intellectual initiation into a system of evangelical doc-*

*trines, and a cold heartless recognition of Christian duties, is a step short of conversion,* and the fatal precursor of that ruin, which awaits the hope of the hypocrite. There may exist in the mind such an intellectual perception of Christian doctrine as may enable a man to pen a system of theological truth, which may edify and instruct multitudes; he may, in the words of St. Paul, “understand all mysteries and all knowledge,” and yet, alas! for the infatuation of the self-deceived soul! be destitute of true love to God and man.

To the humbly seeking and devoutly inquiring soul, the gospel is easy and plain. It is an experimental acquaintance with the love of Christ; it is the infusion of a divine principle into the heart; it is the union of the soul with the great fountain of spiritual influence, which constitutes practical Christianity. Nothing short

of this will support the soul under the pressure of affliction, during the hour of sickness, or the prospect of death. Such knowledge can be possessed, and has often been enjoyed, by the poor tenant of the abodes of penury and disease, with no other instructor than the heavenly Spirit of God, gilding the page of inspiration, and shedding a genial beam of comfort on the dying hour. Such knowledge will support the soul; where the lifeless dogmas of sentimentalism, the cold dreary system of formalism, and the fleeting, dying impulses of natural feeling, leave nothing but uncertainty and darkness. Such knowledge, granted in answer to prayer to every contrite sinner, reveals to the soul advancing to the brink of the grave, the bright realities of an unseen world. It enables the believer, in the prospect of dissolution, to exclaim, in the confidence of faith and hope, "O death, where is thy

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modic efforts. But vital godliness alone reaches the *heart*, breathes a spirit of *privilege* towards God, and instils a divine *principle* of holy obedience and love.

THE END.

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